Meta-media and meta-communication

Revisiting the concept of genre in the digital media environment

Jensen, Klaus Bruhn

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Article

Meta-media and meta-communication – revisiting the concept of genre in the digital media environment

Klaus Bruhn Jensen

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As analytical categories, genres have traditionally occupied a middle ground – between media as technologies and institutions, on the one hand, and discourses as material and modal forms of expression and interaction, on the other. With digitalization, the very concept of genre is in doubt: is the world wide web, Facebook, or the writing on its walls the genre? This article situat es genre in relation to the concepts of meta-media and meta-communication. First, I characterize the computer and the internet as meta-media, incorporating previous genres of embodied communication as well as mass communication. Second, I describe genres as a variety of meta-communication, which serves to configure communication in the first place. In conclusion, I discuss whether and how a category of meta-genres might help to account for some distinctive features of the digital media environment.

Introduction

Genres occupy a middle ground of media studies – between media as technologies and institutions, on the one hand, and discourses as material and modal forms of expression and interaction, on the other. With the ongoing digitalization of information and communication, the very concept of genre is in doubt: is the world wide web, Facebook, or the writing on its walls the genre?

This article takes the current reconfiguration of mass, interpersonal, and networked forms of communication, and of the media environment at large, as an occasion to revisit the concept of genre. First, I distinguish between media of three different degrees: the human body enabling communication face-to-face; the technically reproduced means of mass communication; and the digital technologies facilitating networked interaction one-to-one, one-to-many, as well as many-to-many. This framework provides a way of moving beyond the notion of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999), including not just mass and networked communication, but also face-to-face embodied communication. As illustrations, I refer to different kinds of sound communication (Jensen, 2006). Second, I return to Gregory Bateson's (1972[1955]) concept of meta-communication, which, at least in *mass* media studies, has not been given its due. In a post-mass media setting, it still holds an untapped potential for the understanding of communication as social interaction. Third, I consider whether a concept of meta-genres could help to capture some of the distinctive features of what people do (Katz, 1959), and what they might do, with 'new,' digital media.

Media of three degrees

Bodies and tools – the first degree

In the perspective of the history and theory of communication, human beings can be understood as media. The human body is a versatile material platform, hosting speech, song, dance, drama, painting, and creative arts generally – capacities that are cultivated into competences by children as well as professional artists. In itself, the human body is a necessary and sufficient material condition of communication; our bodies become productive and receptive media of communication through socialization and acculturation. In comparison, tools – writing utensils or musical instruments – are neither necessary nor sufficient, but extend the human body and its communicative capacities in significant ways. Media of the first degree – human bodies and their extensions in tools – externalize accounts of actual as well as possible worlds, and enable each of us to communicate with others about such worlds for both reflective and instrumental purposes.

Embodied communication is perhaps most commonly associated with speech and oral interaction. The everyday conversations that join family and friends, neighbors and coworkers, into groups and communities are key to all social life. Face-to-face interaction, however, comprises diverse modalities of expression. We encounter other people as audio-visual media and in multimodal communication. And, our tools and artifacts create more or less durable mediascapes (Appadurai, 1996). One historical example is so-called rough music, as studied by the historian E.P. Thompson (1991, pp. 467-538) in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, which had parallels in other European countries and in the US. If an individual or a family had offended the rest of a community, it was a common practice to name and shame them by chanting, shouting obscenities, and banging pots and pans. And, rough music is not entirely a thing of the past: On March 11, 2005, BBC World

News reported that authorities in Andhra Pradesh, India, had sent groups of drummers to tax evaders' houses to make them pay up (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/4397907.stm, accessed July 4, 2005).

Verbal language, nevertheless, constitutes a privileged modality – in evolutionary, psychological, and social terms. Language relays categorical information that can be recategorized – restated, responded to, reprogrammed – in ways that no other modality can. As noted by the linguist, Émile Benveniste (1985[1969], p. 236), "the signs of society can be interpreted integrally by those of language, but the reverse is not so." Speech interprets images, but images rarely interpret speech, except in the odd aesthetic experiment.

For most of human history, of course, bards or singers of tales were the only media around – singular and localized archives of information and means of communicating a cultural heritage. The literature on non-literate, prehistoric societies describes oral cultures as context-bound and present-oriented (Goody & Watt, 1963; Ong, 1982; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Far from labeling these as inferior, medium theory does suggest that primary orality – a state of culture that is "totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print" (Ong, 1982, p. 11) – is incompatible with a sense of a historical past, and of a different future. (This is in contrast to a secondary orality, which Ong (1982, p. 11) associated with the spoken word of broadcasting, and a tertiary orality that may be emerging with digital media.) In a primary oral culture, communication is an expression and an event in context, rather than a representation and a resource across contexts.

In a comparative perspective, I include writing with media of the first degree. To be sure, manuscripts supported vast and complex economic, social, and scientific systems for millennia, by fixating information as knowledge and facilitating the reflective production of ever more knowledge. As constituents of communicative practices, however, manuscripts depend on multi-step flows of social interaction. Because copies are precious and few, they will be distributed in an extremely selective fashion to central individuals within established institutions. Such individuals – priests, generals, literate servants, etc. – will pass on even more selective and contextually adapted information with oral commentary within dedicated organizational hierarchies. The point is not only that social hierarchies may restrict public access to information (and to the literacy required) – which has notoriously been the case throughout history. Nor is it merely that the copying of manuscripts is laborious and subject to error, which limits access to precise and applicable information. Rather, in a scribal culture, communication remains an expression and an event that is primarily enacted in local contexts by embodied individuals. Even a utopian state that would encourage and financially support the literacy of its people, and their copying of as many manuscripts as possible for as wide a group of other readers as possible, would require sheer human labor on a scale that makes anything approaching equal access to the culturally available information inconceivable. Mass communication is not a potential of the medium of writing.

In unsentimental terms, Joshua Meyrowitz (1994, p. 54) noted that the comparatively inefficient forms of reproducing and distributing writing made it "a transitional cultural

form." Writing by hand, of course, remains as a major cultural practice. Writing is integral to upbringing and education; to much drafting of texts in political life, business administration, and scholarship; and to communication with one's intimates and, importantly, oneself through notes. In news studies, reference is sometimes made to source media (Ericson, Baranak, & Chan, 1987, p. 41) – oral interviews, scribbled notes, printed press releases, etc. – all of which feed into what is reported as news in media of the second and now third degrees. As media of record, however, and of interaction within and between the main institutions of society, embodied individuals and written texts were superseded by a second degree of media.

Technologies – the second degree

Until quite recently, it was still common to refer to 'the mass media' – media that distribute the same, or similar, messages from a few central senders to many distributed receivers. The philosopher, Walter Benjamin (1977[1936]), famously defined mass media in terms of their technical reproduction and dissemination, specifically of artworks, but with implications for other communicative practices, as well. Whereas Benjamin focused on photography, film, and radio, I take media of the second degree to include the various analog technologies – from printed books and newspapers to film, radio, and television – all of which took shape as one-to-many media institutions and practices of communication. Their common features were, first, one-to-one reproduction, storage, and presentation of a particular content. Second, media of the second degree radically extended the potential for dissemination of and access to information across space and time, irrespective of the presence and number of participants.

Benjamin noted a specific ambiguity that arises from reproduction. On the one hand, it results in the loss of what he termed aura: the sense of uniqueness and, perhaps, transcendence that has traditionally been associated with fine arts – paintings or sculptures, for instance – and with actors or musical performers appearing on stage. Present artifacts and singular actors mediate an absent reality, and thus appear larger than life. (Also other human beings – anyone – could be said to carry an aura, as informed by their biographies and shared histories, and as appreciated by intimates, friends, and, perhaps, strangers in a chance meeting. This, however, was not Benjamin's original point.)

On the other hand, technical reproduction represented a major civilizational advance. When artworks and other cultural products are divorced from their unique, but local origins, they afford many more uses by many more people. Reproduction entails a shift of emphasis in the understanding of art, from singular expression to social communication. Accordingly, Benjamin (1977[1936], p. 390) concluded, art need no longer be subordinated to religious and other ritual uses:

> […] for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art

> reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. […] the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.

"Designed for reproducibility": reproduction is not an incidental, but a planned activity with social implications. Two classic examples – books and newspapers – suggest the point. Books, pamphlets, and other printed formats could be considered a necessary (though far from sufficient) condition of Renaissance and Reformation (Eisenstein, 1979). Newspapers, in turn, served as material vehicles in political revolutions and in the formation of nation-states (Anderson, 1991; Habermas, 1989[1962]). Print media were at once impersonal and public, potentially outside the reach of the auratic leaders of religious and political establishments. The printing press, thus, facilitated the modern understanding of religion as a personal matter, and of politics as a public matter.

Compared to the printing press, technologies for recording and disseminating sound came late to media history, from the 1870s onwards (for overview, see Millard, 1995). For the first time in human history, sound events – from song and other musical performances, to political speeches, to natural environments – could be preserved as part of the cultural heritage. Sound became constitutive of the central mass media of the twentieth century: radio, film (from 1929), and television. Moreover, analog sound technologies contributed to new kinds of soundscapes (Schafer, 1977), in private and in public. In shops as well as in workplaces, an important and underresearched ingredient of urban life has been muzak (see, e.g., Barnes, 1988; Lanza, 1994). In the home, radio broadcasts and recorded music came to compete, in different social groups, with piano recitals and community singing. With several radio, television, and stereo sets per household, private listening increasingly equaled personal listening. From the 1960s, the transistor radio made music, news, and other genres accessible on the move.

It should be noted that multi-step communication remained the order of the day in print and electronic cultures. For one thing, access to printed materials in different historical and cultural settings has remained severely limited by the economic means of potential readers, low literacy levels, and living conditions generally. For another thing, reading as a communal activity – reading aloud – has remained a significant cultural practice (Boyarin, 1992). In a critique and redevelopment of Eisenstein's (1979) classic study of the role of printing presses and books in the Reformation, Pettegree (2005) showed how both processes of reading and of converting to a new faith were public activities involving singing, preaching, drama, and visual images, as well. Furthermore, readers themselves became writers, adding comments or 'marginalia' (Jackson, 2001), perhaps alongside those of others already appearing in book margins (anticipating user tags in digital media), and taking notes for later inclusion in letters. And, in the case of broadcast audiences, the new reception studies from the 1980s documented how audiences, in addition to actively interpreting media content, collectively engage media as part of their communicative practices in context (Lull, 1980; Morley, 1986;

Radway, 1984). Whereas face-to-face and mass communicative practices, thus, have long been intertwined, digital media have lent new material forms to their links and networks.

Meta-technologies – the third degree

Digital technologies reproduce and recombine all previous media of representation and interaction on a single material platform of hardware and software – they are meta-technologies. At the beginning of the era of personal computers, Kay and Goldberg (1999 [1977]), accordingly, described computers as meta-media. As means of expression, digital media join text, image, and sound in some new and many old genres, as inherited from mass media as well as face-to-face interaction: narratives, debates, games, etc. As modes of interaction, digital media integrate one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many forms of communication. The central example of media of the third degree remains the networked personal computer. At the same time, mobile telephones and other portable devices are becoming equally important access points to the internet, and already account for much of the diffusion of the internet in some parts of the world, notably South-East Asia, Japan, and Africa (Castells, Fernández-Ardèval, Qiu, & Sey, 2007).

With meta-technologies, communication has come full circle to the sort of interactive and multimodal forms of interchange that characterize face-to-face settings. With mobile phones, technologically mediated speech has become a much more prominent component of everyday life in the coordination of public as well as private affairs. Online computer games, further, exemplify the integration of different auditory and visual modalities, not just in the representation of a game world, but in the coordination of the gameplay, for instance, through continuous spoken interaction between multiple players (Jørgensen, 2007). And, the sense of being virtually present in some literally absent world may translate into a sense of engagement with public events and issues. One example is the Sonic Memorial project that commemorates the events of September 11, 2001. In addition to presenting sounds from the neighborhood around the World Trade Center, the site includes interactive functionalities so that visitors may themselves "add a sound" (http://sonicmemorial.org, accessed January 15, 2011; Cohen & Willis, 2004).

Digital technologies in general, and the internet in particular, invite research to refocus studies from media to communication, and to clarify the relationship between the two categories. One material medium may support several different communicative practices; some communicative practices travel well between media; and certain familiar practices come back in style when new platforms become available, as illustrated by text messaging (sms). In media of all three degrees, however, communication is facilitated by meta-communication.

Meta-communication in three degrees

The first degree

The key formulations regarding meta-communication came from the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who was examining contexts of face-to-face interaction. Departing from work in anthropology, psychiatry, and cybernetics, he suggested that "human verbal communication can operate and always does operate at many contrasting levels of abstraction" (Bateson, 1972[1955], p. 150), above and beyond the exchange of literal information. Taking a standard example from logic – 'the cat is on the mat' – Bateson noted that this proposition carries a denotation that refers to an actual state of affairs: the position of a furry four-legged organism in space (on a mat that we can point to) and time (is, not was). Apart from such denotations, people introduce, first, meta-linguistic information into their interactions, for example, to clarify that they may mean the word 'cat' to include tigers. Second, they also meta-communicate about their relationship as communicators, "e.g., 'My telling you where to find the cat [tiger] was friendly,' or 'This is play.'" Not only does communication thus operate at several levels at once; "the vast majority of both metalinguistic and metacommunicative messages remain implicit" (p. 151) and must be inferred from their 'context' – in a discursive, material, or social sense. In another publication, Bateson added that "a majority of propositions about codification are also implicit or explicit propositions about relationship and vice versa" (Ruesch & Bateson, 1987[1951], p. 209). The meaning of what we say to each other implies the meaning of our relationship.

Because communication operates at several levels at once, it is ripe with potential conflicts regarding what people are actually saying to each other and, not least, why. Bateson (1972[1955], pp. 173-198) showed how schizophrenic disorders can be understood in communicative terms as the outcome of a 'double bind' in which a person is unable to resolve several conflicting levels of communication. Of course, most people, most of the time, are remarkably good at mastering such communicative complexity. We recognize that 'this is information' (a signal of something else), and that 'this is *this* kind of information' (a message in a specific modality and code, with a particular reference to reality, and a likely relevance for us in context). We establish and adjust our communicative relationships, relying on conventional forms of expression, turn-taking, and role-playing. In doing so, we establish contexts that are both psychologically and socially real, what Bateson described as frames (Bateson, 1972[1955], p. 157). The concept was developed further by Erving Goffman (1974) to suggest how frames are continuously observed or broken, modified and replaced, in social interaction. Media studies have later used the concept of frames to explain how audiences make sense of texts with reference to other texts and to their contexts of use.

Like Goffman, Bateson remained focused on embodied interactions in local contexts. However, his two aspects of meta-communication – codification and communicative relationships – are constitutive of mass and network communication, as well. Technologies and meta-technologies transport texts across contexts, and frames across social settings.

The second degree

Mass media address their audiences at a distance: "hail, fellow, well met!" (Hartley, 1982, p. 87). To establish a communicative relationship among absent partners – a contract of sorts – they depend on genres: discursive conventions of expressing and experiencing a particular subject matter. The concept comes with a long history since Aristotle's *Rhetoric*; it has lent itself to spoken, written, print, and electronic forms of communication; and it has remained a central analytical category within literature, aesthetics, and other humanities. Recent research has witnessed a revived interest in genre across the humanities and social sciences, simultaneously as a discursive and a social phenomenon (Bawarshi, 2000; Miller, 1984, 1994; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). Genres include not just epic, dramatic, and lyrical formats, but job interviews and online dating, as well. Genres constitute frames of interpretation and interaction, including scripts for social action at a later point in time, beyond the moment of communicative exchange.

One of the founders of British cultural studies, Raymond Williams (1977), usefully identified three aspects of any given genre:

- Characteristic subject matter (e.g., the 'public' content of news, the 'private' content of fiction);
- Formal composition (e.g., narrative or didactic forms of expression in texts, still or moving images);
- Mode of address (e.g., the anticipated relevance of an advertisement or a public-service announcement for an audience).

Genres are discursive forms with social functions. They signal the nature of what is being communicated and the kinds of social relationships that are being maintained – the two aspects of Bateson's conception of meta-communication. Unlike both the classic transmission and ritual models of communication (Carey, 1989[1975]) – but like linguistics and semiotics – Bateson and cybernetics helped to bring the micro-mechanics of communication to the fore. Complementing cybernetics, linguistics and semiotics have contributed additional models that help to describe, in more fine-grained detail, how meta-communication works at the level of discourse and genre.

The classic example of a linguistic-semiotic model of communication was presented by the linguist and literary critic, Roman Jakobson (1960). Compared to the two aspects of meta-communication that Bateson noted – codification and communicative relationships – Jakobson identified an entire set of communicative functions. The implication of the model was that all discourses bear traces of all these constituents of communication – sender, message, and receiver; channel, code, and context – to varying degrees and in shifting configurations. Addressing a classic question in poetics – is there a special poetic language? – Jakobson concluded that there is, instead, a poetic function of language, and that this function is manifest in many other genres, for instance, advertising. Poets, while inviting people to ponder what might be the 'message' of their poems (poetic function), also address their readers (conative function) about some possible world (referential func-

tion). Web advertising, in its turn, relies liberally on the poetic function in order to address internet users about the merits of specific commodities that will be sold and consumed in the real world.

In empirical terms, Jakobson (1960) stayed focused on discursive forms. While extrapolating to their communicative functions, his analysis explicitly bracketed the social origins and consequences of forms or functions: "the question of relations between the word and the world" (p. 19). Other humanistic scholars have been more adventurous, seeking to model the common experience that we all listen for tones of voice and choices of words to get the points that others are making – their codes and the communicative relationships that they afford us. Faced with media that communicate at a distance and in additional modalities, audiences read between the lines of texts and the frames of images. This was the insight of Roland Barthes' (1973[1957]) familiar two level model of meaning, departing from Louis Hjelmslev's (1963[1943]) linguistics, and comprising denotations and connotations.

In Bateson's terms, connotations can be understood as codifications – the meta-linguistic aspect of meta-communication. Connotations are codes that accumulate as representations, frames of interpretation, and views of the world. At the same time, codes inscribe communicators into social relations, as recognized by both Bateson and Barthes. Paralleling his model of connotations, Barthes had identified another model which begins to capture some of the distinctive communicative relationships that digital media establish and maintain.

The third degree

Roland Barthes' use of Louis Hjelmslev's original terms and formal concepts was, at best, debatable. Nevertheless, his appropriation of Hjelmslev's basic figure of thought became massively influential in analyses of contemporary culture and communication. Being a twentieth-century linguist, Hjelmslev approached languages as systems – systems of communication and second-order systems that either build on or describe such systems. Barthes' accomplishment was to apply this logic to communication as a practice and a process: connotation languages can be examined not only in the analytical rearview mirror, but as they are articulated and take effect. Barthes, further, included other modalities than spoken and written language into his analysis of the several levels of meaning production.

In Hjelmslev's definition, connotation languages and meta-languages have different, but complementary relations to their common reference point, which is first-order language – 'language' as commonly understood. Connotation languages, on the one hand, build on language, and are themselves languages or vehicles of communication, as exemplified by Barthes' myths. Meta-languages, on the other hand, describe language: they are not languages in themselves, but languages about languages, for instance, syntactical or semantic descriptions of the English language. Compared to Barthes' first model of a connotation language, a meta-language inverses the interrelation between signifier and signified. The connotations add to the codification of the content; the meta-constituents configure the

social relationships that people enter into with reference to this content. A linguist, for one, takes the analyst's rather than the user's stance vis-à-vis language.

Hjelmslev had qualified his typology by making an antecedent distinction between scientific and non-scientific languages. Meta-languages would be scientific languages, defined by their formal operations (but presumably accessible, above all, by expert users of language, such as linguists). In some media and modalities, however, meta-languages are accessible to anyone. Here, I treat meta-languages, not merely as analytical systems, but as practices of communication, as well – meta-communication. Ordinary users of digital media effortlessly employ a wide variety of such meta-languages: they customize their own profile at a social network site; they tag the blog entries of others; they forward a news story to a friend from a website via an embedded email service; and they pull a later push of information to themselves through an RSS feed.

Digital media facilitate interactivity, not only with information, or with other communicators about the denotations and connotations of the information at hand, but also with the interfaces and systems of communication. Users customize their own access points to the internet; they may also affect its infrastructure, to a degree, by participating, for instance, in open-source innovation (Benkler, 2006; Von Hippel, 2005). The potential uses and systemic consequences of such meta-communication in digital media are still being discovered.

All media depend on genres in order to communicate; digital media both incorporate old genres and invent new ones. All communication depends on meta-communication which, in the case of digital media, acquires a specific salience and centrality. Digital media returns the field of research to classic questions of what constitutes a genre in the first place.

Meta-genres?

It should be noted that the vocabularies of meta-communication and meta-media have separate origins. Meta-communication is a constitutive function of any communicative practice in any medium, whereas 'meta-media' (Kay & Goldberg, 1999[1977]) represent an ad hoc conceptualization of digital media. New media challenge media studies to revisit its core concepts.

In the good old days of mass communication – spanning the ages of the book, of newspapers and other periodicals, and of broadcasting – the middle ground occupied by genres seemed rather firm. Digitalization shakes this ground, also for analytical purposes. Whereas we might define the internet as the meta-medium and, for example, online television still as the medium, offering a range of familiar genres – news, fiction series, entertainment extravaganzas, etc. – other forms and aspects of digital media undermine the classic medium-genre-text trinity: the world wide web, search engines, meta-tags, etc.

To begin, genres serve at least three different communicative functions: they are modes of expression, forms of representation, and means of interaction. While theories and studies

of genre have traditionally emphasized expression and representation, digital media – from political websites, to e-banking and online gaming, to the micro-coordination of everyday life through mobile media – have foregrounded the performative aspects of communication, as it unfolds, and as it ends. The internet, for one, enables people to interact, and to act at a distance, in unprecedented ways. Some of these ways are facilitated by functionalities that may be understood as meta-genres: they are not so much media or communication in themselves, but preconditions of a specific range of communications and other actions.

Consider, first, the world wide web. The web is the most massive example, so far, of a networked configuration of media, genres, and texts. As noted by Susan Herring (2004, p. 30), the web is a portal of sorts – a point of access to diverse communicative functionalities, through browsers and graphic user interfaces. If the internet, as a meta-medium, integrates all previous media forms, the web could be said to incorporate most previous genres, including, for instance, novels, even literary classics in brief installments that are sent daily to users' personal computers or mobile devices (http://dailylit.com/, accessed January 15, 2011).

Consider, next, search engines, which web users depend on to identify, relate, and rank items of text, image, and sound. In Bateson's terms, they codify information and configure communicative relationships. Search engines bring home the point that media discourses are much more than representations of, or items of information about, the world; they are resources for action *at and beyond* the interface – cultural involvement, political mobilization, and distributed production, material as well as immaterial. Meta-genres may enable users to do new things with media, some of which have been incorporated into the meta-medium of the internet.

Certainly, the web and search engines are different categories of meta-genre. Like 'meta-medium,' 'meta-genre' represents an ad hoc conceptualization of a set of communicative forms and practices that we employ seamlessly in practice, even while still struggling, as analysts, to make sense of their implications. In this regard, genre studies are trying to account for a moving target.

The very idea of communication – and of its constituent discourses and genres – has been informed over time by the historically available media. As demonstrated by John Durham Peters (1999) in his agenda-setting history of the idea, communication was only recognized as a general category of human activity following the rise of electronic communication media from the last half of the nineteenth century, beginning with the telegraph. These developments encouraged scholars and other commentators to think of diverse practices of social interaction – in the flesh, via wires, and over the air – in terms of their family resemblances. In Peters' (1999, p. 6) words, "mass communication came first." With digitalization, the idea of communication – and of genre – is, once again, in question.

Conclusion

New, digital media return the field to classic questions, for one thing, about genre. In retrospect, genre studies have witnessed a growing differentiation of their domain of study, following the equally differentiated development of print, electronic, and digital media as technologies and institutions – from dramatic, epic, lyrical, and didactic prototypes; via the genre systems of nineteenth-century print fiction and twentieth-century Hollywood cinema; to the current variety of genres across one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communications. 'Going meta,' in one sense, could be seen an evasion of issues that arise from classic typologies of genre – and of media and texts. In another sense, a consideration of meta-genres represents an acknowledgment that digitalization shifts some of the conceptual boundaries that used to work for spoken, written, print, and electronic communication. We might like to map a 2.0 version of media-genre-text hierarchies and theories onto the digital media environment; we just do not have them – yet.

In the meantime, humanistic media and communication researchers, who have traditionally given special attention to genre as a qualitative phenomenon, may take advantage of the digital media environment, also as a tool of analysis. Genres give off clues that can be counted, analyzed, and visualized through socalled data mining (Han & Kamber, 2006). Genres constitute patterns of information and communication; as such, they indicate structures in the production and circulation of meaning across time and space. One recent study examined "a corpus of digitized texts containing about 4% of all books ever printed" in order to "investigate cultural trends quantitatively," documenting changes in, for example, language use, the understanding of fame, and the practice of censorship between 1800 and 2000 (Michel et al., 2010). Genres are among the most stable indicators of communication and culture, and invite comparative studies of how different periods and societies have chosen, and been able, to communicate. One way of understanding present meta-genres would be to mine past genres.

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Klaus Bruhn Jensen
Professor, PhD
Film and Media Studies Section,
Department of Media, Cognition and Communication
University of Copenhagen, Denmark
kbj@hum.ku.dk